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Fund Request for Salvador Runs Into Strong Doubts

The Company It Keeps Puts U.S. on the Spot Once Again

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WASHINGTON — The capital continues to be caught up in the moral dilemma over El Salvador: Should the United States provide political, economic and military support to a leadership that is threatened by a Communist-backed insurgency, but whose record in legal and civil rights practices is, in Secretary of State George P. Shultz's words, "indefensible"?

The specific current issue, unresolved as the week ended, was whether Congress would approve another \$80 million in military aid to be diverted to El Salvador, adding to the \$1 billion in economic and military assistance already funneled there over the last several years. The arguments raised are similar to those heard in the past about American backing for various regimes in South Vietnam, for the Franco Government of Spain, for the military rulers of South Korea, and for dozens of other dictatorships whose claim to American friendship was based primarily on their opposition to Communism.

As the Senate Appropriations subcommittee took testimony last week, it was evident that history teaches different lessons. Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii, who announced his decision no longer to support open-ended funding for El Salvador, warned Mr. Shultz that by aiding the regime in El Salvador because it was anti-Communist, the United States was repeating the mistakes of the 1950's when it supported Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban dictator.

"History must have shown us that we have played a part in the creation of Fidel Castro," Senator Inouye said. "We were well aware of the utter corruption of Batista. Because he said he was against Communism we supported him throughout. I am afraid that we may be creating another Castro (in El Salvador). We are inviting revolution there. I think it is time for us to support those who are being oppressed, those who are victims of violence, those who are being slaughtered."

On the other side, Senator John C. Stennis, the conservative Mississippi Democrat and a veteran of the lengthy debates in Congress over Vietnam in the 1960's and 1970's, said the lessons of that war led him to believe that more force should be applied in El Salvador, that a blockade of Cuba, for instance, should be considered to block the flow of arms to El Salvador. Senator Dennis DeConcini, a conservative Democrat from Arizona, also cited the lessons of the past to urge an all-out American military involvement in the region, warning that piecemeal aid to El Salvador would only be wasted.

The Reagan Administration's approach to this kind of dilemma has been ambiguous from the start. It has generally been critical of cutting off aid to friendly nations for human rights reasons, on the ground that no matter how bad the record

may be in a country such as El Salvador it would be considerably worse under a Communist totalitarian regime. Moreover, in Central America, the Reagan Administration has argued that national security reasons impel the United States to prevent Communist takeovers. The so-called domino theory, first put forth by President Eisenhower in the 1950's to justify American involvement in Southeast Asia, is very much alive today in Central America.

The Administration repeatedly contends that Nicaragua is a quasi-Communist state, that tiny Grenada has fallen to the Marxists, and that there are Cuban-backed threats in Honduras and Guatemala. The United States has stepped up military aid to these countries, and may or may not be involved with anti-Sandinist forces entering Nicaragua from Honduras. Officially Washington claims the problems in Nicaragua are of Nicaraguan origin, but there are various reports of backing by the Central Intelligence Agency for Nicaraguan exiles trying to regain a foothold.

In defense of its human rights policies, the Administration says it has tried to quietly bring about reforms in friendly countries. Mr. Shultz argues, as have other American officials in other times and places, that only by continuing to provide aid can the United States moderate repressive actions in a country such as El Salvador.

The Salvador situation is unusual, however, because of the case of the four American churchwomen — three of them nuns — who were murdered on a lonely road near San Salvador in December 1980. The Salvadoran military perpetrators of the crime have allegedly been identified and they are in custody, but the Salvadoran judiciary has repeatedly delayed bringing them to trial. The case of the nuns has aroused more concern among Americans than the thousands of Salvadorans who have been murdered in recent years. And it has made a moral hostage of any discussion of the Salvadoran aid question.

"You cannot get me to sit here and defend what has happened under the judicial system of El Salvador," Mr. Shultz told the committee. "I won't do it. I don't do it. I don't think it is defensible." "If in the end," he declared,

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"they don't clean up this act, the support is going to dry up and they've been told that."

Mr. Shultz's warning hardly satisfied Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, who feels as strongly on the subject as anyone. His voice rising in indignation, he said to Mr. Shultz that "it is an open and shut case; El Salvador is thumbing its nose at us. It is saying, 'Give us a billion dollars and go to hell.' "

The Senate Appropriations subcommittee approved the \$60 million transfer on the condition that the Administration takes steps to bring the case to a trial, that it limits military advisers to the current level of 55, and that it tries to bring about unconditional negotiations between the opposing sides. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose legal ability to block the aid transfer is questionable, cut the total to \$30 million, with similar conditions. The House Appropriations subcommittee put off action until after the Easter holidays, when the moral debate is likely to be just as agonizing.